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ABSTRACT

Objectives of the research project described in this report were to explore the African American adolescents' perceptions of the social forces shaping their lives and well being. The project examined: (1) perceptions and understandings of racial discrimination; (2) their views of the value of schooling and the role of school achievement; (3) their self-perceptions in terms of abilities; (4) the impact of adolescents' ethnic identities on school performance and social adjustment; (5) the influence of peers on adolescents' perceptions of the importance of educational achievement; and (6) adolescents' relationships with their teachers. Parenting styles and parent-child relationships have also been examined. Findings suggest that the more African American students perceive themselves as targets of discrimination, the less they believe that schooling is important, and the more they report symptoms of anxiety and depression. African American adolescents perceive the inequalities that exist in American society, and these perceptions affect their adjustment. Additional research is needed to examine the effects of child-rearing practices common in African American families. Historical and sociological material concerning racism and discrimination in American society should be integrated into instructional material; this could have a positive effect on African American psychological adjustment and school achievement. Additional research with a focus on the African American subculture will help design programs and approaches that can overcome the effects of discrimination and socioeconomic factors. (Contains two figures and four references.) (SLD)

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ED 400 363

Family as an Agent in the Education Process: A Test Theory of Underachievement of African-American Adolescents.

Principal Investigator: Ronald Taylor

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The National Center on Education in the Inner Cities

CEIC Research Brief

Number 105

Family As an Agent in the Education Process:

A Test of a Theory of Underachievement of African-American Adolescents

Principal Investigator: Ronald Taylor

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Data from past and recent large-scale surveys have shown that achievement differences between African-American and white youngsters begin in elementary school and persist throughout all grade levels (Humphreys, 1988; Norman, 1988). This discrepancy in achievement is especially distressing in light of current and expected shifts in the labor market toward jobs requiring higher skills and higher levels of education.

A promising and increasingly popular explanation for the academic problems of African-American students is that the persistent underachievement of African Americans is an adaptive response to their limited social and economic opportunities in adult life. According to this thesis, low school achievement represents an adaptive response to the requirements of cultural imperatives that exist within the social contexts or ecological structure facing African Americans.

The overall goal of research in this program has been to characterize the social and environmental contexts facing urban, inner-city families, to identify the strategies families employ to promote their adaptation, and to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies.

Specifically, objectives of this research project have been to explore the African-American adolescent's perceptions of the social forces shaping their lives and well-being in American society. This project has examined such issues as: (a) the adolescents' perceptions and understanding of racial discrimination; (b) their views of the value of schooling and the role of school achievement in their social mobility; (c) their self-perceptions in terms of abilities; (d) the impact of adolescents' ethnic identity on their school performance and social adjustment; (e) the influence of peers on adolescents' perceptions of the importance of educational achievement; and (f) the adolescents' relationships with their teachers. Each area represents factors related to achievement.

This project also examines the impact of the child-rearing practices of African-American parents on adolescent school achievement and psychosocial adjustment. African-American adolescents typically have not been the focus of attention in the child development literature and, thus, little is known about the social forces that shape their development. This project looks at issues such as: (a) parenting styles and adolescent adjustment and school performance; (b) kinship relations and parents' child-rearing styles; (c) kinship social support and adolescent adjustment; (d) parental involvement in adolescents' schooling; and (e) family environment and adolescents' adjustment and achievement.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS

- The more that African-American adolescents perceive themselves as targets of discrimination, the less they believe that schooling is important and the more they report symptoms of anxiety and depression.

- African-American adolescents perceive the inequalities that exist in American society, and these perceptions have negative implications for their psychosocial adjustment.

- Research on child-rearing practices common in African-American families and their impact on adjustment of adolescents is important because very little is known about the nature of family relations in African-American households. This research shows that extended families play important roles in the social development of adolescents and in the adjustment of *all* family members.

- Family members are better adjusted when they have the benefit of kinship support; children are more likely to be exposed to positive parenting behaviors when extended relatives offer assistance. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship between kinship support and adolescent adjustment.

- Adolescents who view their neighborhoods as relatively safe tend to have more positive adjustment and better school per-

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formance. This relationship and its effect on parental adjustment and parenting practices—as well as the social support network discussed above—is shown in Figure 2.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

- Historical and sociological material concerning racism and discrimination in American society should be integrated into instructional material; this could have a positive effect on African-American psychosocial adjustment and school achievement.
- Social policy and programs that serve the African-American community must recognize that kinship relationships serve as primary group social supports for African-American families living in urban areas. Programmatic efforts that strengthen these relationships could have positive effects relative to parent involvement and the development of self-reliance, better behavior and grades in school, and increased resilience in African-American youth.
- Family policy and programs which aim to impact poor African-American households should develop programmatic components that connect the family to other parents in the community. Schools could be instrumental in this process through scheduling events so as to attract adults from the community, parents, and parents-to-be into the school building at the same time.
- Increasing networks for neighborhood safety and protection ultimately can contribute to more positive adolescent adjustment and better school performance.
- Local government should strongly encourage the coordination of resource delivery in order to enhance support systems for African-American families. Local school boards must work closely with the department of recreation, city social service agencies, etc., in order to ensure coordinated delivery of resources.
- Further research is needed in order to apply these findings in specific areas of curriculum and social policy. Additional longitudinal and cross-sectional data are also needed in order to better understand the long- term effects of African-American parenting styles and kinship relationships.
- All of these data need to be applied in a larger model of African-American adolescent subculture formation relative to perceptions of the opportunity structure, the reality of downward mobility, and the dynamics of family functioning in the African-American community.

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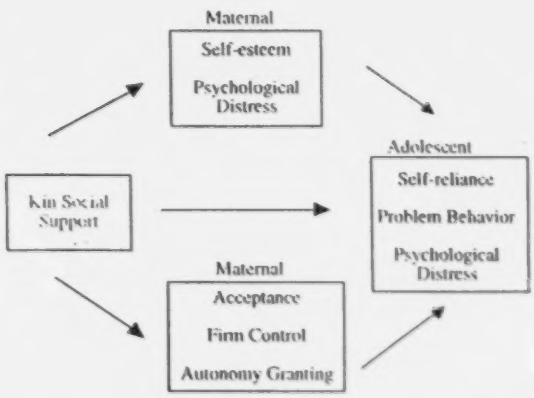

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the mediation of the association of kinship support and adolescent well-being.

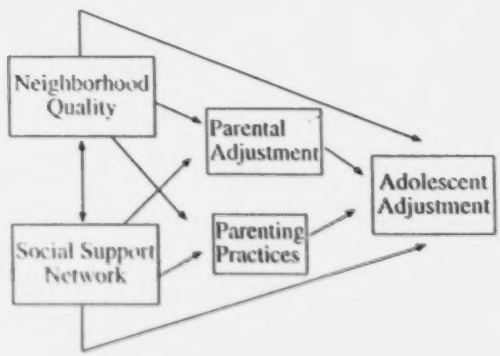

Figure 2. Conceptual model of the association of neighborhood quality, family social network, and parent and adolescent well-being.